

**WE'D BETTER START SWIMMING:  
A PLAN FOR CLIMATE ACTION, ECONOMIC GROWTH, AND EQUITY IN CORPUS  
CHRISTI, TEXAS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Climate change is coming for Corpus Christi, Texas, and with it comes economic disruption. In this thesis, I lay out the challenges facing my hometown, and offer my thoughts on how the city might turn them into opportunities. I begin by laying out what I see as the specific threats facing the city as a result of both the direct effects of climate change, and the need to address those effects by taking action against the fossil fuel industry, which also serves as the primary local industry. I describe what national action on climate change could look like, and then discuss the specific risks of unmitigated global warming to Corpus.

Next, I discuss the consequences of failing to plan for the coming changes, using analogies to previous points in American history and projecting current trends to the future. I analyze the specific ways in which Corpus may suffer from inaction, and identify some of the specific vulnerable populations who would be left behind in such a case. In this section, I also dive into the philosophical reasonings behind the need for action, and why it is that we should specifically care about saving the city of Corpus Christi. Following this, I offer my thoughts on the current COVID-19 crisis, which has profound implications for this work.

Using my analysis of the current situation, I then offer a three-part plan for the post-fossil fuel future of the city of Corpus Christi. In this plan, I focus on infrastructure, economic development, and land use. I posit a broadening of definition of infrastructure, and advocate for a re-prioritization in how we shape our physical spaces. With economic development, I dive into some of the industries which thrive in the Corpus of the near future, and tackle the specific issue of displaced workers from the oil and gas industries. Finally, I explore a case study in economic land use policy, and offer a template for its application to the land which will one day be vacated by the refineries currently present in the city.

I conclude with a discussion of some of the current forces which are accelerating the city's timeline for action, and outline how my suggestions might apply in this specific case. Lastly, I end with a call to action, and my hope for the future of the city of Corpus Christi.

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## Preface

### The Times Are A-Changin’

I feel compelled to begin this work with this simple statement: everything has changed. The writing of this thesis has spanned the better portion of a year, and what a year it has been: when I began in April of 2019, I could not have imagined that this project would finish in the midst of a global pandemic. I sought to craft a plan for my hometown of Corpus Christi to move into the future with consideration given to specific economic and environmental challenges I felt were brewing. My resting assumption was that Corpus faced fast-approaching challenges, and we had but a few years left to take action. Plainly, I was mistaken. The time to act is now, as the old order crumbles beneath us. To put things plainly, when Corpus married its economic success to the fossil fuel industry, it signed a deal with the devil. Today, that deal is coming due.

From my vantage point, I see two great waves coming for my city: one is economic ruin, the other environmental disaster. Both come as a result of the failures of the fossil fuel industry, but they are not necessarily destined to hit at the same time. My initial assumptions were that environmental disaster would pave the way for economic ruin: that once the threat of climate change prompts action, the economic lifeblood of Corpus would necessarily be cut off, bringing with it its own problems. My goal with this endeavor, then, was to try and ensure that we were ready for that second wave by beginning the process of rapid economic diversification now.

I am no great surfer, and the waves of Corpus are rarely anything worth writing home about. But I did grow up on the beach, and spent many summer days in the shallow waters off Port Aransas and Padre Island “body surfing”. This technique required no board, just a strong

swimming stroke and an eye for the waves. I would float and watch as the swells approached, looking for one that I knew could grow large enough to carry me. Then, in the near distance, I'd spot it, and start paddling towards the shore. If I hit it just right, I'd feel the wave approach from behind, pulling me back, and then I'm soaring atop the wave, a few fleeting seconds of childish exhilaration and salty spray. But sometimes I'd miss the wave and start swimming too late: in those cases, water would come crashing overhead, sending me down into the brine with stinging eyes and burning nostrils. The lesson is the same now as it was then—these waves of change are coming for the city, and it is time to start swimming. The potential is there for us to undercut the threat of economic disaster by investing now in diversification, and to turn the challenges of addressing climate change into opportunity for Corpus Christi: to ride the coming waves to the shores of success. But if we wait much longer, then I fear for my city, as the costs of a city missing a wave of this magnitude are going to be far worse than a little salt in the eyes.

I also wish to make clear that this thesis is based on my research and personal thinking, and I recognize it is not (and is not intended to be) the sole viewpoint or the final word in the conversation. I am a young, straight, white, cisgendered man who has had a good deal of privilege in his life. I am a single individual trying to tackle an elephant, and though I have tried to do my best to approach the discussion from a place of self-reflection and awareness of my blindspots and biases, I know I have left thousands of perspectives and approaches on the table. My hope is simply to be able to contribute to this process as the city I love undergoes monumental changes, and to offer my own views and ideas.

So, in summation, Corpus is facing serious threats to its established economic and social order, but with these threats come opportunities if we can begin planning now for the coming

changes. Corpus needs a concrete plan for what the city could be, and a positive vision of how to adjust to a new and changing order. We can sit and wait for Corpus to fall, or we can start preparing now in crafting a vision for the fate of the city which is grand, aspirational, and leaves us in a position of greater strength. The key, of course, is immediate action: we need to start thinking seriously about our future and preparing our plan of action now. I feel Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan best synthesized the core of this idea in 1964:

*“Come gather ‘round people, wherever you roam,  
And admit that the waters around you have grown,  
And accept it that soon, you’ll be drenched to the bone.  
If your time to you is worth savin’,  
Then you better start swimming, or you’ll sink like a stone,  
For the times, they are a-changin’”*<sup>1</sup>

This, then, is the crux of my thesis—to recognize the changing times and to mobilize Corpus to start swimming now, before our city sinks.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Times They Are A-Changin’* feels like a truly prescient song in these times. It may have been written about the tumult in the ‘60s, but the lyrics seem equally applicable now: at times, I was nearly tempted to quote additional stanzas or even the full song, but was ultimately able to restrain myself. Regardless, please know that if this thesis were a multi-media endeavor, that song would play as the soundtrack throughout the reading process—it certainly served as the soundtrack for the writing process.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

When I began the project of my Plan II thesis, I knew one thing—I did not want this to be a strictly academic endeavor. I was attracted to Plan II from the beginning, four years ago at the time of this writing, because I looked forward to this very moment, placing the capstone upon nearly half a decade of study. Since I began my studies at UT, I have known I wanted that capstone to be something that could have a real and tangible benefit for a place that I have long been deeply passionate about: my hometown of Corpus Christi, Texas. That, then, was my humble goal as I set out on this journey. Using this chance to dive deep into detailed research and consideration, I wanted to craft a strategic plan for Corpus, something that could be actionable and do the most good. Over time, I gradually refined my target as I narrowed in on what I felt were the most pressing challenges facing the city in the years to come. Corpus is a rapidly growing city, and is changing by the day. I feel strongly that it can be a pioneering city of the future, and continue to grow and attract people.

However, as I considered what challenges or opportunities I should try to address with this opportunity for study, I could not escape the fact that the most pressing threat to the city is the same force which threatens our entire world: climate change. Corpus, as a coastal city, is of course especially prone to the effects of global warming. Sea level rise is a pressing issue in a city that has already had to build a seawall to hold the Bay at bay, and the prospect of more extreme weather events is concerning in a city which regularly lies within the projected paths of hurricanes and tropical storms each year.



Yet despite the fact that climate change is a grave threat, it also presents opportunities. The way things stand, Corpus has essentially two options: do nothing, and watch as the Corpus Christi Bay creeps up to swallow the city, wreck infrastructure and property, and displace citizens; or recognize the threat and take action to defend the city from climate change. That defense will necessitate large investments in infrastructure and other changes, and it is here that I say that climate change offers an opportunity. Ultimately, the goal of my thesis is to put forward the beginnings of a framework for how such a plan might be shaped and implemented for action in the city of Corpus Christi.

This thesis is structured around the central assumption that at sometime in the coming future, national action will be taken against climate change. This may come to fruition in 2021, should the Democratic party oust President Trump from the White House. It may not. Writing as I am several months before the 2020 election, I have no desire to prognosticate or predict. This then is the potentially morbid calculation on which my thesis rests: either someone with authority will wake up, take charge, and take steps to address this crisis, or they won't, in which case we will face a very different question: what do we do if we're fighting alone?

With this understanding in mind, I find it useful to proceed from the more optimistic scenario: somehow, someday, someone who understands and takes seriously the gravity of our situation will find themselves at the levers of power, and will move forward with a plan to address it. Whatever plan they develop will necessarily have to be broad and multifaceted in its scope to match the scope of the climate crisis it seeks to solve. This plan will affect virtually every single American in every single community, but some places will necessarily be more affected than others. Corpus, for fairly self-evident reasons, is very likely to be one such city.

I will begin this journey by first providing background on the history of Corpus, the current local situation in regards to climate change, and a brief explanation of the idea referred to as “The Green New Deal”. While the focus of my thesis is not meant to be overly national, this specific policy proposal is currently the most prominent proposed solution to climate change, and I feel it meshes well with many of the proposals for Corpus that I will later discuss. In this section, I will also offer a brief justification for why the scope of our solution to climate change should be broader than what might seem immediately apparent.

Following this background, I will then shift my focus from consequences of inaction on climate to the consequences of inaction in regards to city-scale economic planning. There are very specific risks that I identify which could threaten Corpus should action be taken on global warming with no additional preparations or support given to the city, and I will outline those here. Additionally, I will consider some of the elements which must go into any plan for city development, and attempt to place the concepts in a larger framework.

The bulk of my thesis will be focused on what the blueprint for Corpus post-climate action might look like. I will consider proposals centered around redesigning infrastructure in the region, exploring new avenues for economic activity in the city, mitigating against the effects of sea level rise, and ensuring that equity and equal access to opportunity are built into the plan from the beginning. As I conclude, I will discuss some of the options for Corpus should the immediate need for change come before we see serious national momentum to help address it: I will attempt to answer my earlier posed question of how Corpus might at least begin to fight for its future on its own. Finally, I will offer a call to action for the city as I bring this thesis to a close.

## Chapter Two

### Background

#### Corpus Christi, Texas

In general, I do not enjoy background sections in writing. Rarely do I think they are truly useful to the core endeavor, and they often seem to serve better for bolstering the final page count than they do in actually educating the reader. However, I do feel some discussion of the background of Corpus Christi would be of use here, if only for the fact that the city may not be quite as well known even to Texans as some of the more populous metropolitan areas: Austin is weird, Houston is the melting-pot energy-hub on the bayou, and Dallas has the Cowboys. But what is Corpus?

Corpus was originally founded in 1839 as a trading post on the bluffs over Corpus Christi Bay in the sparsely populated disputed territory between the Republic of Texas and Mexico. Before that time, the area had been used primarily for the smuggling of contraband goods. During the Mexican-American War, it served as a base for the U.S. Army under the command of General Zachary Taylor. In 1852 it incorporated, and in 1926 the Port of Corpus Christi (which is now the third-largest U.S. port) opened after a decades-long effort to obtain a deep-water port in the area.<sup>2</sup>

Today, Corpus is the eighth largest city in Texas with a population around 325,000 and a total north of 440,000 in the greater metropolitan area.<sup>3</sup> Corpus is the county seat of Nueces

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<sup>2</sup> Long, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> World Population Review, 2020.

County, and home to the Corpus Christi Naval Air Station. Two of the primary industries driving city economic activity are oil/petrochemicals and tourism. The USS Lexington, which is moored in the bay, and the Texas State Aquarium are two of the largest tourist attractions, along with the local beaches and nearby Padre Island National Seashore. Local universities and institutions of higher education include Texas A&M Corpus Christi and Del Mar community college, as well as several trade and vocational schools.

Like many other southern cities, Corpus has a somewhat complicated history with civil rights. The Supreme Court case *Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School District* came about as a result of racially discriminatory practices in education taken by the school board; the case was ultimately the first ruling that upheld and extended the 1954 decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* to Mexican-American students as well.<sup>4</sup> The ruling prompted the flight of many white students to the Calallen Independent School District, a previously small and rural district in a town that was conveniently annexed in 1970, the same year the decision came down.<sup>5</sup> However, Corpus does also have some more positive legacies on civil rights. In 1929, the League of United Latin American Citizens was founded in the city; LULAC is today the largest latinx organization in the United States.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Corpus was also the location in which Dr. Hector P. Garcia established the American G.I. Forum, which has done essential work for both Mexican-American veterans and broader issues of civil rights like voting rights and advocacy.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Allsup, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Gurrola, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Orozco, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Allsup, 2018.

## Climate Change in Corpus Christi

Corpus Christi is in peril. Climate change, and the accompanying rise in sea level, is an existential threat to the Sparkling City by the Sea. Even moderate projections of sea level rise spell serious concern for the city. If no change is made, Corpus may need to change its city slogan to “the Sparkling City *in* the Sea”. The table below outlines the direct costs to the Corpus Christi metro area for two scenarios of sea-level rise. The first, a two-foot rise, is a moderate projection. If climate change continues unchecked, we could be in for this scenario within forty years. The second scenario projects a six-foot rise, which studies suggest is the median increase expected by the end of the century should emissions continue at the current levels.<sup>8</sup>

	<b>2 Feet</b>	<b>6 Feet</b>
<b>People</b>	1,373	14,103
<b>Land Area</b>	8.9 sq. miles	92 sq. miles
<b>Roads</b>	16 miles	338 miles
<b>Homes</b>	1,210	11,615
<b>Property Value</b>	\$429 million	\$3.4 billion <sup>9</sup>

Additionally, a six foot rise would also swamp the local university, Texas A&M Corpus Christi, six schools and oil refineries, and ten wastewater sites.<sup>10</sup> Also, this table only outlines the direct costs, and indirect costs could be orders of magnitude larger when factoring in loss in future tourism and economic value, emigration, and other either unforeseen or difficult to project costs. Finally, we make the assumption here of a six-foot sea level rise as the “worst-case” scenario, though projections by the National Oceanographic Atmospheric Administration state

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<sup>8</sup> “See Your Local Sea Level and Coastal Flood Risk”, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Author’s own work with data from Lee and Climate Central.

<sup>10</sup> Lee, 2016.

the increase in sea level in the area by 2100 could potentially be just short of twelve feet.<sup>11</sup> Were this to come to pass, the costs would dwarf the six-foot scenario, and spell true unmitigated disaster for the area. Considering these projections, the need for immediate action on climate change is evident.

When it comes to addressing climate change, there are numerous approaches, though all essentially boil down to one of two main ideas—prevention or mitigation. Prevention is largely a strategy reserved for national and international institutions, as it requires curbing world-wide emissions and preventing the further degradation of the environment. Mitigation-based strategies tend to be those which have the most potential for direct and immediate benefits at a city level. I will talk about some of the specific strategies to mitigate the negative effects of global warming—namely, rising temperatures and sea levels—in my later discussion of infrastructure.

However, despite the fact that there is nothing the city of Corpus can do to single-handedly prevent climate change, the city should not ignore preventative actions. There are three reasons I feel city-level policies focused on prevention can be meaningful. First, as I will demonstrate in further detail in the succeeding paragraph, Corpus certainly bears culpability for its role as an emitter of greenhouse gases. Second, while I do not explore this proposal in much detail, I firmly believe that Corpus and other coastal cities must take on the role of lobbyists against the climate crisis. Minimizing the city's carbon footprint, even if it does not significantly reduce the overall scope of the problem, is an important step to take before going out to advocate for action on a greater scale. Finally, prevention is a crucial strategy to undertake regardless of any other factors present—mitigation can never be our sole strategy in addressing

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<sup>11</sup> Climate Central, 2017

climate change. We can build our seawalls higher, design buildings resistant to more extreme weather, and figure out ways to deal with dangerously hot summer temperatures, but at some point we will have to address the root problem before mitigation against climate change becomes far too costly, ineffective, or even impossible.

When considering prevention, of course, the options open to a single city staring down the barrel of catastrophic climate change are limited, especially if the greater state and national governments seem content to sit back and fiddle as Rome drowns. Corpus is not blameless in the climate crisis, however, just as all of us do bear some responsibility for our own individual contributions to greenhouse gas emissions. While there is no data available on the city's specific contribution to emissions, Texas is by far the greatest contributor to global warming in the nation, emitting 707 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in 2017, nearly double California, the next closest state.<sup>12</sup> Corpus, with a population of around 330,000 people, represents about 1.1% of the total Texas population of just under 22.5 million. Cities, however, contribute proportionally more to climate change than rural areas, accounting for 80% of greenhouse gas emissions on average.<sup>13</sup> In Texas, if that figure were to hold true, cities would collectively produce around 565.6 million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>. Texas is 85% urban, meaning that Corpus accounts for 1.7% of the urban population of the state.<sup>14</sup> Using these estimates, the final result would be that Corpus produces just around 9.7 million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>,<sup>15</sup> roughly on par with

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<sup>12</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2016

<sup>13</sup> "Cities and Climate Change: An Urgent Agenda", 2010

<sup>14</sup> Cowan, 2016

<sup>15</sup> A note on this calculation: I am making the assumption that Corpus pollutes at an amount proportional to its share of the urban population of Texas. The case may be made that this underestimates the amount that a city such as Corpus with such heavy refinery activity contributes to state emissions. However, when balancing that consideration with the fact that emissions do not scale perfectly with population, as larger, more industrial cities such as Houston and Dallas have a disproportionately large carbon footprint in comparison to mid-sized cities like Corpus, I felt this middle point to be a fair assumption to at least offer a frame of reference for the scope of the problem.

the emission levels of Rhode Island.<sup>16</sup> The fact that a mid-sized city, just the eighth-largest in Texas, could have a carbon footprint on par with an entire state is merely a testament to the disproportionate contribution that the Lone Star State is making to climate change: it seems everything really is bigger in Texas.

It is clear that reducing emissions at a city-wide scale in Corpus would not be so trifling a step in the fight against global warming as it may seem at first glance. Of course, even if Corpus became a net-zero emission city overnight, the threat of climate change would remain, absent any action from the outside world. This is why mitigation, specifically through the construction of new infrastructure and bracing existing structures against changing environmental threats, must be such a central point of a city-scale plan for the future.

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<sup>16</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2016



## What's the Deal with the Green New Deal?

This thesis, as stated before, is not intended to have an overly national scope. It is not my intention here to spend too long dwelling on the various ways in which national political forces may converge to prompt climate action. However, there is one concept which I feel merits further discussion, due both to its current prominence in the national debate and to the fact that I personally feel that it, more so than any other currently offered plan or proposal, offers the greatest hope for success in combating climate change and addressing the structural issues which persist in a city like Corpus Christi. I am speaking, of course, about the Green New Deal.

The framework for what is now referred to in national politics as the “Green New Deal” was first established by a group called the Sunrise Movement, and most prominently championed by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. The Sunrise Movement offers the following definition for exactly what it is they hope to accomplish with this plan.

*“The Green New Deal is a 10-year plan to mobilize every aspect of American society to 100% clean and renewable energy by 2030, a guaranteed living-wage job for anyone who needs one, and a just transition for both workers and frontline communities.”<sup>17</sup>*

For the purposes of this thesis, my use of the term “Green New Deal” is not meant to only refer specifically to the exact plan put forward by the Sunrise Movement and Representative Ocasio-Cortez, but also to the broad idea that we must address the threat of climate change with investments that go beyond what would initially appear to be the scope of the problem. Climate change offers both an opportunity and a moral imperative to reshape the underlying

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<sup>17</sup> Sunrise Movement, 2014

infrastructure of our society as this existential threat forces us to tear out much of the groundwork of the status quo and build anew.

At first glance, climate change may appear to be a wholly discrete problem from socioeconomic inequity and opportunity. Climate change stems from an overreliance on fossil fuels and the release of excessive greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere over the course of the past few decades of industrialization. Socioeconomic inequity has decidedly more nebulous and far-reaching roots, but the current iterations present in cities like Corpus can be fairly blamed on prejudice and racist policies of the past and present. A fair philosophical argument may be made that the two are perhaps symptoms of some deeper societal ill, but my purpose here is not to argue about how the origins of these two issues may or may not be linked. Instead, I intend to outline how the solutions to these problems must inexorably be tied together.

Consider the following metaphor. There is an apartment building, several stories high, with multiple apartments on each floor. The building is fairly old, built in the 1950's, and in hindsight, the builder made several structural oversights in its construction. Nevertheless, the apartment has largely withstood the wear of the past few decades, and hundreds of occupants have called this place home. The individual rooms have weathered the years in various levels of success. Some, designed with care by the original architect, are still sweeping and magnificent, with high vaulted ceilings and hardly any signs of age. Others are more modest, though structurally sound. Some areas of the apartment were clearly not constructed with the same attention to detail, and have the creaking floors, leaking ceilings, and sagging walls to prove it. Still others were not built with inattentiveness, but suffer now from structural issues which could have been mitigated with the presence of technologies and techniques not available at the time of

construction. Over the years, residents have called for improvements, and some have been made, but none which would disrupt the status quo or entail major overhauls.

Life continues unabated in the apartment complex, until one day a water main ruptures on the ground floor, causing significant structural damage to the foundation of the building. It is apparent that this mishap will require massive investments into repairs, both to correct the damage already caused as well as to prevent a similar occurrence from taking place again in the future. But in making these repairs, should the managing board of the complex seek to restore the building simply to its pre-incident status? Of course it seems logical that this instance of necessitated investment should be capitalized on to address the deeper inequities that existed in the building prior to the water damage.

Yet our problem is still more complex than this metaphor implies: as I will outline in the chapters to come, the problems that many residents are dealing with are not simply happening in concert with the failure of the old ways: they are a direct result of the old ways. Apathy, ignorance to negative externalities, and environmental racism have been some of the core requirements of the old status quo, and cannot be left unchecked in the new one. This is the foundational logic of the Green New Deal, and one which inspires much of the approach I take here in addressing climate change and economic development on a local level.

## Chapter Three

### Sink Like a Stone

#### Introduction to Challenges

So far, I have largely framed the crossroads ahead of us as a simple double fork. Down one road we see action, change, and a national prioritization of climate change. Down the other lies the continuation of the status quo, by which we fail to collectively recognize the problem and mobilize society against it. But, in truth the first path forks several times more. This is why careful planning and early action is so necessary: even once we see society and institutions start to take the steps necessary to address climate change, we will not yet be out of the woods. In this section, I will outline some of the potential perils of Corpus “sinking” due to a failure to plan. The dangers that may lie ahead cannot be predicted with any certainty, but the ones I outline are a few which I believe seem to be fairly likely and understandable. They include Corpus being left behind, ignoring the needs of vulnerable populations, and the rise of dangerous new political ideologies.

Additionally, I want to take the time here to try and dig deeper below the surface of the problems we face, to discuss root causes and forces at play, and to offer my personal thoughts on what is required of us in this trying time. I don’t feel that it is enough to describe the situation we find ourselves in in merely superficial terms. In many ways, it was superficial and purely of-the-moment thinking which has brought us to this point. This is not meant to be an overly pompous endeavor to uncover the profound: many of the thoughts I have on this subject are

virtual regurgitations of thinkers I admire, and kernels of wisdom plucked crudely from greater ideas expressed far more eloquently elsewhere. Still, I feel it is useful to explain in further depth my thinking on this issue, and why it is that I feel so strongly about not just finding a solution, but finding the right solution.

Lastly, no work can be removed from its time, and I feel that is all the more true as I write these words today. It is important to note the impact that the current times have had on this project, and so at the end of this chapter I will take some time to reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic which is currently affecting the world. As I will demonstrate, there are a number of important parallels and lessons which can be learned during this crisis for application in our coming climate crisis.

## The Consequences of Inaction

I have already discussed some of the potential costs to the city if no action is taken to combat climate change, but there are additional costs inherent in a failure to prepare for a response to the climate crisis. This may not be immediately apparent, but I feel there is a clear case to be made that a Corpus unprepared for a change in climate policy is as at-risk as a Corpus unprepared for climate change. The greatest concern I would have during a period of national climate action is that Corpus might be ignored or not fully considered in the implementation of a response to climate change. As the preceding discussion will show, it is no guaranteed fact that policy makers in Washington, D.C. will fully take coastal communities like Corpus into account when allocating resources and coordinating the fight against global warming, and so it is inherent upon us as a city to stand up and ensure that we are ready to take a seat at the table and outline our local needs.

## NAFTA as a Case Study

Change is coming to the world broadly, and to Corpus specifically. In a way, Corpus (and cities like Corpus) face a challenge akin to that which was faced by the American “Rust Belt” in the wake of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In fact, it is my opinion that the example of NAFTA provides a perfect cautionary template for what *not* to do in the face of climate change. NAFTA was, in the opinions of many of the top economists and analysts, a net positive for all three economies involved.<sup>18</sup> It addressed a pressing problem relating to

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<sup>18</sup> Hills, 2013

regional trade, and created a \$19 trillion market,<sup>19</sup> quadrupled trade between the three nations,<sup>20</sup> and increased foreign direct investment.<sup>21</sup>

The direct costs to the United States of the trade agreement are nebulous and remain serious points of debate even today. We can say, with certainty, that in the two decades following NAFTA, there was a net loss of 600,000 manufacturing jobs in the US due to import growth.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note, of course, that these jobs were not necessarily lost because of NAFTA, but simply that they were lost after NAFTA. NAFTA did not necessarily cause these job losses, but it may have helped to accelerate forces already at play.<sup>23</sup>

Now, I feel the need to make an important caveat. NAFTA was clearly not solely responsible for the forces which we have seen at play in the Rust Belt over the past few decades. But NAFTA does, I feel, accurately represent a summation of the forces at play in the region, or at the very least, their public perception. When I refer to NAFTA, I don't necessarily mean the trade deal itself, which by most econometric metrics, had a fairly moderate positive economic impact. Rather, I mean the socio-political forces which gradually shifted over time, so that a region which was once a primary economic center of the country became isolated, alienated, and felt left behind. This was not the result of any concerted effort to do harm to the Rust Belt and its people, but rather the expression of forces which did have a net-positive benefit for the nation. The United States in the 1980s and 1990s was moving away from an industrial, manufacturing centric economy, and moving to one centered around the service-sector. Simultaneously, globalization promoted international trade deals to capitalize upon the well-documented

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<sup>19</sup> Hills, 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Amadeo, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> McBride & Sergie, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> "NAFTA's Impact on the U.S. Economy: What Are the Facts?", 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Bolle, 2000.

economic principles of gains from trade, further accelerating the flight of manufacturing jobs from the de-industrializing United States. It seems fairly clear that on the whole, these forces were positive for the nation as a whole. However, whether from apathy or ignorance, adequate measures were not taken to ensure that these gains were felt by all. The result was a further concentration of wealth and benefits in areas outside the Rust Belt, and fairly profound losses in the region. Again, this seems to have been the result of normal economic forces acting naturally. The failure lies in leaders and institutions which did not respond to the losses of the newly disenfranchised appropriately, prompting a backlash against those entities and forces which were perceived, fairly or not, to have upended the prevailing status quo to the detriment of formerly industrial communities. NAFTA, as the most prominent example of a trade deal which impacted American manufacturing, became the scapegoat to many of these communities as they tried to understand and explain their current ills. This feeling of being discarded by “Washington elites” sparked an anger which has been capitalized on by numerous politicians, including most recently and notably, Donald Trump.<sup>24</sup> Some social scientists and researchers have also found links between the economic forces in the Rust Belt and similar communities and the opioid crisis, the rise of white nationalism, and political polarization.<sup>25</sup>

Here is where I feel the comparison to the fossil fuel industry is apt. Imagine a world in which substantial action is taken on climate change. It may come in many forms, from direct government intervention and action to simple economic processes by which further investments in carbon-producing industries are disincentivized, and the externalities of pollution and global warming become priced into various energy-producing resources to reflect the true costs of their

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<sup>24</sup> Coaston and Carney, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Mayer, 2017.



use. Regardless, we can see the rough results of the decarbonization of the nation as potentially synonymous with those of the deindustrialization of the Midwest. Without government intervention or other institutional investments to counter localized negative externalities, the same phenomenon may come to pass, as a force with a net-positive national impact wreaks havoc upon communities and regions once heavily reliant upon the extraction, refinement, and distribution of oil and gas. The Gulf Coast, and Corpus in particular, could be particularly hard-hit. The evaporation of a substantial number of well-paying jobs would be economically devastating to many families. One can only imagine what other disparate responses to this pain may manifest.

In many ways, the legacy of the response to NAFTA is what has enabled the extreme reluctance we have towards addressing climate change. Many working-class Americans may be inclined to feel that government intervention in the economic status quo can only have negative effects for their lives. This attitude has helped to provide the current political climate, in which action on the pressing issue of climate change seems so impossible. But this reluctance ignores the fact that a response to climate change is inevitable. We cannot reverse the warming of our planet overnight, nor can we erase the impact that the fossil fuel industry is having upon the environment. Climate change *will* be addressed eventually; the only question is on whose terms?

If we are to learn from the lesson of NAFTA and implement solutions to a global problem in a way that accounts for all affected peoples and does not leave swathes of our nation behind, then we must first identify who the vulnerable and at-risk populations in Corpus are. The most apparent, through a direct analogy of the effects of NAFTA on American manufacturing, and the potential impact of a Green New Deal or similar climate action plan on the oil and gas

industry would be larger by orders of magnitude. Even in the face of the disclaimer that no perfect answer to the number of jobs lost due to NAFTA exists, we can use the 600,000 job figure as a high-end approximation. This is a big number, but represents less than five percent of the over twelve million US workers currently employed in manufacturing.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, any plan to seriously address climate change would call for the elimination of virtually all jobs related to fossil fuels over time. For context, the oil and gas sector of the US economy is not quite as large as manufacturing, but still represents around 10 million jobs nationally, and roughly two million in Texas alone, according to figures from 2015.<sup>27</sup> In Corpus, the energy and manufacturing sectors account for over a third of all jobs in the region.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, then, the consequences of failing to act in ways which benefit and protect the newly unemployed would dwarf the consequences of inaction on NAFTA by orders of magnitude. It is crucial then that any plan that the City of Corpus Christi implements takes into account the needs of these workers, and provides for a transition as the city decarbonizes.

### **Ghost Town on the Bay**

The former workers in the fossil fuels industry are not the only at-risk populations in need of consideration, however. They may be at greatest risk of loss in terms of relative status and resources, from the shift away from fossil fuels, but we must also consider those peoples who are already being actively disenfranchised and forgotten under the parameters of our current system. We must make sure that any plan to address climate change also considers those who have already suffered and are currently suffering. Like an oil spill in the waters of the Gulf, it is

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<sup>26</sup> National Association of Manufacturers, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> API, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Cargo, 2020.

not merely enough to contain the flow of pollution and remove the source: we must also travel the shore to take care of the herons and egrets caught in the oil slick, declog the fisheries, and loosen the choking black sludge which clings parasitically to the roots of the sea grasses. Similarly, we have people who are already living with the consequences of climate change and the fossil fuel industry who require the city's attention.

Corpus Christi is a coastal community: the city is named for the bay on which it sits, and for much of its history, its prosperity has been tied to the sea. The oil and gas industry and climate change have fundamentally affected the prosperity of that sea. Even without considering the impact the industry has had directly on the coastal environment (i.e. actual oil spills), those who rely on the sea's bounty will be affected. Climate change could have serious repercussions for fisheries and diminish the long-term outlook for those who rely on fishing as their primary economic activity.<sup>29</sup> Even those who have not yet seen the effects may notice their nets coming up empty more and more often as the years go past, and action should be taken now to provide for their needs down the line.

Some people may not yet realize they have been victimized by oil and gas producers, but others could not be more aware of the costs the industry has had in their lives. Studies have found that health outcomes can be negatively impacted by proximity to refineries, including asthma, increased cancer risk, birth defects, and premature death.<sup>30</sup> The neighborhoods which border these refineries are termed "fenceline communities", and are prime examples of environmental racism. Environmental racism is a phenomenon by which neighborhoods populated primarily by people of color and lower socio-economic status are disproportionately

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<sup>29</sup> Gustin, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Kluin, Spapens & White, 2016.

burdened with pollution and other hazards which impact quality of life.<sup>31</sup> These deep racial disparities in access to housing are reflected by racial and socio-economic barriers which also prevent equal access to healthcare, further compounding the negative effects.<sup>32</sup>

In Corpus, one of the largest fenceline communities exists along “Refinery Row”, a ten-mile stretch of refineries to the north of the city. The residents of the surrounding neighborhoods are largely low-income and people of color, with a growing number of undocumented immigrants, who face even greater challenges in access to healthcare.<sup>33 34 35</sup> Throughout the years, there have been numerous disturbing cases regarding the release of toxic chemicals from the nearby refineries into the community, including a recent case of benzene pollution. Benzene is a known human carcinogen which is produced as a by-product from oil refineries.<sup>36</sup> In February 2020, the Environmental Integrity Project found two Corpus refineries, Flint Hills and Valero East, to be among the ten worst benzene polluters in the nation.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the concern of environmental racism is all the more pressing now in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel coronavirus is a respiratory virus, and an increase in air pollution in a region is directly linked with higher mortality rates from such viruses.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, the pollutant most responsible for this increase in mortality, fine particulate matter or PM2.5, has been found to be present in increased quantities in the neighborhoods around Refinery Row.<sup>39</sup> It is clear that the needs of fenceline communities will not evaporate overnight

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<sup>31</sup> Lumen, n.d.

<sup>32</sup> NCBI, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Laris, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Elizondo Griest, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Artiga, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> NCBI, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> EIP, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Gerretsen, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> ATSDR, 2016.

with the exit of the fossil fuel industry, and the city has a moral imperative to make serious investments into these neighborhoods and people.

We should also prepare for an influx of climate refugees. While this thesis is focused largely on the local environment of Corpus Christi, no city is an island, removed from the influences of the greater world. Climate change will displace residents of communities around the world through its various disparate effects: droughts and climate-triggered famine, natural disasters, and armed conflicts prompted by resource scarcity. We can fairly expect that some of these refugees, particularly those from Latin American countries, may very well find their way to Corpus. When they do, they should be welcomed warmly, and the influx of new migrants can be a boon for the city. However, we must ensure that the city is prepared to welcome them, with economic opportunities and the infrastructure to support new community members. Failure to do so will not only have a negative effect on the individual outcomes of the migrants, but may spark backlash and hate out of a perceived threat of scarcity. This potential backlash is something I feel is of special consideration, and I wish to discuss it in further depth.

### **Eco-Fascism and Apathetic-Egoism**

There is a somewhat peculiar attitude currently at play in the mainstream American (and, more broadly, global) Left. Currently, the bulk of climate awareness and calls for action are originating from the Left. This is a fairly unique phenomena in American politics at the moment, for on most other issues, we may see disagreements on the scope of issues or the appropriate state responses, but rarely upon the most central realities of the problem. Both Right and Left recognize the issues facing the nation in healthcare, immigration, and gun violence—they simply

diverge in how they believe we as a country should prioritize and address these issues. But on the issue of global warming, the mainstream position of the Left is that climate change represents a serious threat which requires immediate action to curb the use of fossil fuels and develop green infrastructure, while the mainstream position of the Right is that climate change is not real, or at least not a significant threat, and no action is needed. This dissonance in the positions of the two sides has led to the development on the Left of what I believe is a somewhat naive position.

Because the Left has for so long been the only voice offering forward solutions, while the Right has simply denied the core supposition that a problem even exists, much of the Left's energy has gone into persuasion. The core belief here seems to be that if they can simply ring the alarm bells loud enough, the nation will awake to the problem and accept the diagnoses that the Left has proffered to the issue. Because many of the solutions put forward to address the problem have come from a similar ideological background, there is somewhat of a blindness of what the universe of potential solutions may look like. Climate change is a result of collective oversight, and stems from behavior which most of us played some role in, so clearly any solution must take these considerations in mind. At the very least, the best way to solve the problem of climate change seems simple: stop (or at least significantly curb) emissions of greenhouse gasses. What could be more obvious?

Yet this view ignores another, darker possibility. What if, as current climate denialists awake to the issue of global warming, they do not accept the solutions rooted in shared sacrifice and progressive thought? This basic premise is what gives rise to eco-fascism, a movement currently on the rise on the far right. Eco-fascism largely begins from the core principle of "humans are the virus" and takes it to its seemingly logical solution: the virus must be held in

check, and its spread limited. Combining Malthusian ideas on overpopulation with nativist and anti-immigrant ideology, ecofascism is the “belief that the only way to deal with climate change is through eugenics and the brutal suppression of migrants”.<sup>40</sup> Eco-fascism is not monolithic in the ways in which it is expressed by its adherents, though common themes exist, especially the idea that with multiculturalism and the spread of peoples away from their “ethnic homelands” comes environmental degradation. This ideology goes so far as to advocate for the murder of “excess population” in order to “save” the rest of the world from threats like climate change.<sup>41</sup> In large part, the fairly recent mass shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand and El Paso, Texas were inspired by eco-fascist ideology.<sup>42</sup>

Eco-fascism is a dangerous force which could have serious consequences in our future, though I am personally doubtful of its potential for wide scale enactment. Eco-fascism, like the related forces of neo-nazism and white nationalism, may well play a major role in future American political life, but the views seem unlikely to be held by much more than a loud yet marginal minority. I don’t wish to downplay the risks, of course: if recent events have shown us anything, it is the damage that such groups can be capable of when our political institutions fail. Still though, I struggle to imagine eco-fascism in its current iteration as a force which could become the mainstream counterpart to progressive climate proposals. It requires adherents to ascribe to a form of such blatant and obvious racism that its appeal is limited in the America of 2020.<sup>43</sup> Currently, then, we have essentially a binary set of options in mainstream US climate

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<sup>40</sup> Darby, 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Manavis, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Darby, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> I do not mean to suggest that mainstream ideologies rooted in racism and xenophobia are impossible today—they are clearly not. But these policies typically employ at least some sort of dog-whistle or coded language; eco-fascism has ditched the dog-whistle for a bullhorn.

policy. There is denialism and a related range of “maybe-it’s-changing-but-it’s-not-that-bad”isms on one side, and on the other, a broad scope of policies and ideologies fundamentally rooted in the ideals of shared sacrifice and collective action.<sup>44</sup> But when denialism becomes an intellectual impossibility<sup>45</sup>, where will the center of mass on the right gravitate towards?

When Mussolini took power in Italy in 1922, he offered the nation a new political solution intended to address the “end of Europe” and perceptions of societal decay; his fascism was introduced as a “third way”: an alternative to the existing binary of liberal capitalism and Marxism.<sup>46</sup> But if eco-fascism is not the heir apparent to its ideological sire’s crown as the “third way”, then what is? I propose that we may see a form of “sanitized” eco-fascism, one which does not rely on outright hatred, but simply selfishness and apathy. The hypothetical views I describe are not a new discovery, but in my research I have failed to encounter a term which accurately summarizes this force, so I have arrived at simply calling it “apathetic-egoism”. Egoism is a branch of philosophy which states that a moral action is that which advances your own self-interest, similarly, apathetic-egoism is based out of a pragmatic maximization of personal benefits (or a minimization of personal costs) combined with a strong apathy towards the suffering of the greater world.<sup>47</sup> Allow me now to further elucidate what a future governing ideology based in apathetic-egoism may resemble.

Climate change unchecked will have negative global effects, this is a virtual scientific certainty. But those negative effects do not necessarily have to be globally distributed, in much

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<sup>44</sup> This is certainly a broad spectrum: it runs the range from neoliberal market-based solutions to more progressive redistributionary models. Clearly, a meeting of minds from this “big tent” would feature numerous passionate and heated debates. Still, all these views fundamentally recognize that climate change is a problem with collective effects, and thus requires some degree of shared sacrifice.

<sup>45</sup> I am making the very generous assumption that it isn’t yet.

<sup>46</sup> Ben-Ghiat, 1996.

<sup>47</sup> Shaver, 2019



the same way as some solutions to climate change may carry costs that cannot be evenly distributed. Apathetic egoism would state that our response to the imminent global threat should not be an embrace of some enlightened doctrine of universal solidarity and collective action, but instead an attitude of everyone for themselves. Many of us presently tend to assume that when climate refugees come to our borders, seeking refuge after famine or flooding caused by forces largely put in motion by the United States and the rest of the developed world, that our response should be to recognize our responsibility and handle the issue with compassion. But apathetic-egoism would not accept the idea that such a response is required of us: in this view, accepting climate refugees could potentially strain our resources and leave us personally worse-off. This outcome does not seem too far-fetched: in some ways, I worry it seems more likely than the alternative. Our history is full of examples of us turning our backs upon the needy and suffering, even when their need and suffering is a clear result of our own nation's actions. Lady Liberty may call for the tired and huddled masses of the world to take refuge under her torch, but countless examples from the past show that this aspiration is not held as immutable law.

We may further assume that the response to the recognition of climate change would prompt us to cease the actions which further its severity—but perhaps they won't. “Drill Baby Drill” was a prominent mantra of climate denialism, but it works just well as an apathetic-egoist rallying cry with an attitude of “the world is going to garbage, and we'll be kings of the trash heap.” At the end of the day, this idea is eco-fascism in a suit: an ideology that could be more palatable in cable-news coverage, fueled off the support of people running the range of motivations from a fear of any change to the status quo to outright neo-nazis. At the end of the

day, though, apathetic-egoism repackages eco-fascism into a more marketable ideology while preserving some of the key features: the prioritization of the self and a callous indifference towards the people of color who are likely to make up the bulk of the victims of climate change.

Clearly eco-fascism and apathetic-egoism present significant threats on a national and international level. But my focus here is on the localized impacts of inaction. Much as I ignore the specific methods by which carbon divestment and other national forces play out as outside my scope, the ways in which the US could address eco-fascism nationally are far too broad and complex to be considered here. However, these ideologies could have localized expressions in the face of an apathetic response to the changes coming to the Coastal Bend. Should we repeat the mistakes of NAFTA and fail to meet the needs of displaced workers, eco-fascism will be waiting with open arms to offer an outlet through which to direct their anger. And should apathetic-egoism become a dominant ideology, Corpus will be at risk of signing its own death certificate, refining and polluting until the sea rises up to meet the city.

## The Importance of a Plan

Thus far, I have laid out some of the arguments for action and the consequences of inaction. However, I still feel there is more which needs to be said from a philosophical standpoint on the importance of intentional planning. My greatest goal and endeavor in this project is not simply to craft something which is a response to current or even future threats. It is my fundamental belief that we must be able to do more as a collective than simply respond to external stimuli: we must imbue our public lives with a profound sense of meaning and purpose. I don't wish to waste time pining for some idealized features of a past we may or may not have ever even had, but it does seem to be the case that the fundamental challenge of this time is not merely a void in leadership, but a void in vision. We need, fundamentally, to leave behind the reliance on apolitical and amoral governance which has become the modern standard, especially at the subnational level. It is perhaps not in vogue to wish for more ideology in a time which seems so polarized, but how can we engage effectively in politics without some discussion of the good life?

The summation and highest, most idealistic purpose of the work I describe here can be understood through the light of imbuing local leadership with three key tenets: intention, philosophy, and the metaphysical aspects of place. First, we should be intentional in the actions we take, and strive to craft policies and institutions not only for the present moment, but for the years and decades to come. We need a forward-looking and adaptive approach to ready ourselves for both the challenges we see coming and those we do not. Second, we need to be willing to engage in civic life with a sense of purpose. To call it "philosophy" perhaps implies something I

do not mean to suggest; it is not necessary that city officials can cite Aristotle or Hume, but rather whenever we act, we should think deeply about the implications of our actions (and inactions) and how they may fit into a broader schema. When we expand city transit, what are we saying about our priorities and our vision for society? Further, we should consider how our actions fit together into a larger framework, and evaluate constantly the overall cohesion of our activities. We need to be able to think deeply about the duties we owe to one another, our place in the community, and our community's place in the world. Ultimately, we must be willing to tackle life's profound questions through mundane actions.

Finally, we should always act with an understanding of the importance of place. Local politics and local leadership should not simply be thought of as a junior varsity team to the larger state and national scenes, but as a specialized and important platform from which some of the projects with the greatest individual impacts can emerge. Place is a nebulous term: it is the physical location where we reside, yes, but also the community around us and the values that community represents. We need to recognize the beauty and centrality of place in our lives. So important is this concept in regards to this endeavor, that I feel it is deserving of further discussion.

### **Place: a Cause, a Problem, a Solution**

*Place* is inexorably intertwined with the climate crisis. It is the reason why we must keep up the fight, a key component to the solution, and the cause of the problem in the first place. *Place* is a powerful and often overlooked concept in American civic life. When it comes to the issue of climate change, it cannot be ignored as a root cause and a potential solution. Some have

argued that as we became a more nationally- and internationally-minded people, we lost our sense of place, and forgot the importance of our local communities. This unmooring made it possible for us to ignore some of the warning signs as we listed aimlessly into the shoals of environmental disaster. For the mobile and affluent, the costs of the petrochemical industry are largely siloed away in small towns or in the parts of cities they rarely venture to. When the negative effects of the industry are felt—increased red tides, a acrid breeze blowing off the bay, dark, rank sludge washing up on the beaches and clogging the estuaries—the blame is often placed on the *place*. Personal experience shows me this is the case: when these negative effects are felt by the city there is hardly any anger at the actors who have caused these externalities, only disgust at “Corpus Crusty” and a desire to escape. The Devil plays his greatest trick, and our cities take the fall. When we do recognize the local costs of the industry, our national mindsets allow us to recognize the “greater good” of the presence of the industry in our backyard. Perhaps, in this regard, we have grown too selfless—maybe we should re-learn how to be somewhat more selfish on behalf of our community needs.

These misplaced frustrations allow us to further ignore the costs of unfettered industrialization. We as a human race are remarkably good at taking what the world gives us and normalizing it. These serious bugs in our environment, when increased gradually over time are more often taken as non-ideal features rather than new and concerning flaws. Like the classic experiment of the toad in the boiling pot, we sit and wait and wait and sit and start to believe that the water has always been this warm.

*Place* offers a further complicating factor. It will take massive investments to save our city and establish it for the future. In the face of imminent climate change, then, it is easy to see

how neo-liberal market logic may offer a way out: should the financial and physical costs of living in the city rise, residents should simply relocate to a new place. But this argument assumes that Corpus is populated by *homo economicus*, that paragon of rationality which populates the pages of economic textbooks. True—in the face of indifference and inaction, those with means or a lesser attachment to the city may well move inland, to still-thriving economic hubs. But many will remain, and not simply out of sheer stubbornness or ignorance. There is something to be said about *place*, and the importance it plays in our lives. To the economist, a city is simply the landscape over which activity takes place. It holds value only insofar as it has potential for future productive output or holds major capital investments which cannot easily be transplanted over a shorter time horizon. But to a citizen, that city means so much more. That city holds the home where they took their first steps and the stadium where they watched their first high school football game. That street there was the way to school, this one led to their best friend's house, and that one rarely ventured down for fear of the ferocious-looking stray who patrolled the empty lot. The city is more than just a background for economic activity to them—it's home. Human history is dotted with examples of people who when faced with impending disaster, made the seemingly “illogical” choice to stay put in their homes: why should we expect that the climate crisis will be any different?

It is also important to consider that the populations who must necessarily be more tied to their homes, and for whom relocation is potentially the most damaging, are some of our most vulnerable populations. It may be easier for more affluent, middle-aged people to pack up and relocate in the face of a crisis, but we need to consider the young, the elderly, and those of lesser economic means. To accept an outcome which leaves these members of our communities high

and dry (while we escape inland to be high and dry) would be a profound neglect of our duties to one another.

I also want to challenge the notion that the relationship we develop with the places we live is illogical. Under a standard *homo economicus* framework it certainly seems out of place, but if economic thought holds that value is only given by human actions, then have we not seen that *place* holds tremendous value? The costs of relocation can not be fairly limited to only the physical costs, but must consider the emotional costs as well. Taken as a whole, these costs rapidly rise to exorbitant levels as we try and quantify emotional costs that come from being uprooted from your hometown, your way of life, and displaced from the community. With this picture of cost in mind, we can start to see more clearly the logic of why we must plan to save our city, and it is in this way that I believe the concept of *place* offers a solution to the problem we find ourselves in. When we can start to talk about and understand the importance of *place* in our lives, recognize deeply the value it holds, then we can use that force to motivate the difficult actions it will take to save our city. When we stop thinking about *place* and community in the abstract, and start thinking of them as living, breathing forces which shape our lives and guide our actions, then we will be able to do what has to be done.

### **On Toads and Tsunamis: Lessons from COVID-19**

Nowhere is the importance of forward-thinking planning and leadership more apparent than in the COVID-19 pandemic. As I write, I sit in my West Campus apartment under a shelter-in-place order. Across the country, American daily life has all but ground to a halt. This feels like a seminal moment in American history, and the optimist in me hopes it may be a

turning point. This virus poses a difficult challenge even in an era of modern modern medicine which was supposed to be free of the cycle of plagues and deaths which typified the centuries before. Yet still, it does seem to be the case and a widespread belief that many of the problems we are faced with today are in many ways a result of poor planning and leadership. If COVID-19 teaches us anything, perhaps it will be the necessity of preparing, both for the expected and unexpected. Disruptions happen and changes come, and we as a society need to be ready for them. Already there are those who have drawn the connection between this crisis and the climate crisis; what is needed now is for powerbrokers to make the same connection and take necessary action.

The issue, however, lies in where the two problems seem to differ. COVID-19 has hit the United States and the world like a tsunami: abrupt, sudden, and disastrous. A few months ago, the virus was limited to only a few cases in the Wuhan province of China. One month ago, life in this country was still largely unaffected. When facing a disaster that moves as rapidly as this one, it is virtually impossible not to respond. But the climate crisis poses a different sort of problem, in that it seems less likely to be a tsunami and more likely just an incremental worsening. To draw upon an earlier analogy, climate change is like the slowly warming pot which boils the toad. Additionally, climate change is not like COVID-19 in that it is harder to talk about direct causation. When a person with coronavirus dies, or hospital resources are overwhelmed by COVID-positive patients, we have a clear and immediate culprit. But when devastating hurricanes such as Harvey, Irma and Maria in 2017 cause death and destruction, we cannot in quite the same way say that this was due to climate change. Global warming makes disasters like these powerful hurricanes more likely, but individual disasters are necessarily *the result* of



climate change. Problems like this with long time horizons and somewhat obscured relationships between cause and effect are more difficult to plan against, in part because the costs of inaction are not so readily apparent.

The global warming denialism movement, which has for so long hampered our abilities to seriously address climate change, seems to be an outgrowth of a greater distrust and misunderstanding of science in the public arena; this distrust further manifests itself in the “anti-vaxx” (or anti-vaccination) movement. Yet today, our most trusted national official is arguably Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, a calm and logical man of science, as the whole world sits waiting desperately for a vaccine to deliver us from the pandemic. Perhaps the COVID-19 crisis will herald the triumphant return of science into the public discourse, and we will soon hear the death knell of widespread public sentiments against the recognition of anthropocentric climate change. Or perhaps we will see that our society truly possesses a remarkable ability to rebound upon a return to normalcy, and the old anti-science picket lines will once again be manned and fortified. Only time will tell.

My greatest worry is that this time of struggle brings out the worst in our society, and we see a further acceleration of a nearly half decade global trend towards authoritarianism. Could the pandemic sow further distrust among the international community, increasing the likelihood of some of the national responses discussed in the earlier section on eco-fascism? Such an outcome would be absolutely ruinous not only to our efforts to address climate change, but also to marginalized communities the world round. Already, we have seen some leaders espouse views which seem to parallel the earlier discussion of apathetic-egoism. Some leaders have expressed the sentiment that the economic costs of current containment efforts outweigh the

benefits to human life, stating “there are more important things than living”,<sup>48</sup> and some states and cities have moved to reopen against the guidance of the medical and scientific community.<sup>49</sup> Could we see a similar response to climate change, that loss of life on the other side of the world is acceptable so long as we do not challenge the economic status quo? Perhaps, but my faith rests ultimately in the good of humanity prevailing, though I feel we all have a duty to maintain a watchful eye on these forces before they grow too strong and take too deep a root.

But the novel coronavirus offers one last potentially positive lesson of relevance here. It underscores the fact that we can come together as a society and embrace shared sacrifice in pursuit of a larger goal. The response has been far from perfect, and there have been voices of dissent criticizing some of the measures taken to contain the virus and “flatten the curve”, but nevertheless we’ve seen the capacity we have to address an issue which is bigger than any one of us and threatens us all. This has been a true tragedy, and nothing can erase the pain felt by those who have lost loved ones, but if there is a silver lining, it may be that we have all seen that we as a society have what it takes to solve our greatest challenges.

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<sup>48</sup> Samuels, 2020

<sup>49</sup> Fernandez and Montgomery, 2020.

## Chapter Four

### Heeding the Call

#### Introduction to the Plan

The problem facing Corpus has now been defined, and the urgent need for action underlined. How then should the city proceed? There are three aspects I will focus on here. The first is infrastructure and basic city functions. In this section, I will argue that our understanding of infrastructure must be broadened beyond the common definition in order to establish the city of the future. With this framework in place, I will offer suggestions on what a template for what a modern re-investment in city infrastructure might resemble.

The second is economic development, with special consideration for the unique challenges of former workers in fossil fuel and fossil fuel-dependent industries. Corpus will need new industries to offset the loss of fossil fuels and to get ahead of long term trends in automation and employment. Additionally, we must recognize the social contract we have with displaced workers, and build in features such as job guarantees and retraining.

Finally, I will consider the question of land use in the former refinery plots. Throughout the modern history of Corpus, this land has been the source of both tremendous economic value and exorbitant socio-environmental costs to the city, and this tradeoff has long typified the bulk of economic activity in Corpus. Using case studies in city land use and progressive economic theory, the future I propose for this land is an aspirational one which seeks to break this trend and advance a model of simultaneously economically and socially productive spaces.

All of these issues are necessarily interconnected and correlated, and thus their solutions are as well. While this plan is broken into three main sections, it would be hard to implement any one without the others.

## Infrastructure

If Corpus is to face fundamental changes, the city cannot expect to continue forward without fundamental changes in core infrastructure. Already, Corpus is dealing with a system of infrastructure unable to truly meet its current needs. The stress that will be brought about by a proportionate response to global warming will further tax an already overburdened system, and could lead to serious failures. However, while infrastructure is a core part of the plan I propose for the city, I am not a civil engineer, nor do I have the requisite skills or experiences to describe in detail the needs of the city's public works or the specific ways they may be updated and expanded. Rather, I will take the liberty of speaking broadly and generally about what sorts of investments should be made. I also want to take the time to discuss what we classify as infrastructure: for much like the systems themselves, our terminology needs updating for the modern challenges which face us.

When we think of infrastructure, most common conceptions primarily fall into one of two categories: transit, including roads, interstates, airports and seaports; or basic utilities such as water, electricity, gas and internet. These types of infrastructure are referred to as “hard infrastructure”, and are undeniably important in the basic functioning of a city. Far more rarely considered, however, is social infrastructure: like parks, schools and libraries. Social infrastructure, defined as the “physical places or organizations that shape the way people interact”, can be equally as important as hard infrastructure.<sup>50</sup> Social infrastructure is a key

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<sup>50</sup> Klinenberg, *Palaces for the People*

consideration that I will focus on here in the case of Corpus, along with the related concept of social capital.

### **Social Infrastructure and Social Capital**

Many of these ideas on social infrastructure come from the work of sociologist Eric Klinenberg, who has argued that social infrastructure is a key component of civic life which can help deal with issues as diverse as public health, the opioid epidemic, political polarization—and even climate change. Social infrastructure allows us to get out into our community in casual, social ways and to form and strengthen networks between families, friends, neighbors and strangers.<sup>51</sup> These ties are vital: studies have found that a more robust social infrastructure in an area can have a marked impact on life expectancy and survival rates in disasters.<sup>52</sup> Another key aspect in the importance of social infrastructure is that by strengthening and reaffirming community ties, it can help to emphasize and drive home the importance of *place* in the lives of city residents. As discussed earlier, by strengthening the public value we confer to the places in which we reside, we are able to further motivate people to make deeper investments into their local communities. Though it is the case that this plan is intended to be taken in its whole, rather than broken into three discrete segments, a focus on social infrastructure may be seen as a precursor and necessary first step to some of the subsequent recommendations as it facilitates everything else. To engage in economic development, we need to be able to both attract and retain local talent: we need to break the cycle by which some native residents of the city feel the need to flee their hometown for big, thriving economic hubs elsewhere in the state or nation,

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<sup>51</sup> Klinenberg, Youtube

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

rather than to return and re-invest in a community which made serious investments into them. In some ways, we need to look at it as making clear the value and beauty of the local community to residents from an early age such that we almost “increase the pain” these young emmigrees will feel in leaving their hometown. This is not to say that we should try and discourage the youth of Corpus Christi from gaining experiences in the broader world: quite the contrary. We should want for ambassadors from this city to venture out to college and into the world, to broaden their horizons and learn—and then bring that knowledge back to the Bay to be implemented and drive further progress. However, we must also achieve one other task with our social infrastructure: we should ensure that in our libraries and our schools, work is being done to counteract some of the present trends: these ambassadors should represent the city more evenly, and our systems must promote racial and economic equity when it comes to the people who are able to obtain these opportunities. There is no panacea I can offer to such a problem, but it is crucial that the city take representation into account as it plans for the future, and ensures that this philosophy is also present in the composition of the body which is in charge of crafting such a plan.

Additionally, social infrastructure investments are likely to bring community members in and increase the general willingness to spend money to invest in other sectors. One of the greatest challenges facing Corpus right now from a community basis is a resistance to change, and an unwillingness to make sizable investments in city improvements. I believe a large part of this resistance can be attributed to the dissociation some people feel from their local communities, causing them to not see the full value of these investments. While most of the funds necessary to allow this transition process will hopefully come in the form of grants from national and state entities, the city needs to be willing to spend the necessary amounts to keep

and sustain progress. Early investments in social infrastructure may make that shift in attitude more likely.

Public gathering spaces can have a myriad of social benefits, but their implementation must be intentional in all respects. This requires putting thought into the design process on how these spaces will appeal to various citizen groups, and how the physical layout causes people to interact with the space and with each other.

Social infrastructure is not just limited to physical spaces, however. This understanding of infrastructure must also include organizations which facilitate social cohesion and interactions. These organizations can take a variety of formal and informal shapes, but the one thing they have in common is a focus on building the social capital of participants. One such entity I want to focus on with greater civic investment is Leadership Corpus Christi.

Across Texas and the nation, many regional chambers of commerce and city governments have established organizations aimed at the civic development of local leadership. Leadership Corpus Christi was created in this same mold, though it is one of the oldest community leadership programs in the nation. The program is run by the Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce, and is a “10-month intensive training program for emerging and existing leaders” which “provides access to high level CEO's and government officials; educates participants on Corpus Christi's past, present and future; provides a networking opportunity unlike any other; and utilizes training and professional development tools.”<sup>53</sup> The ultimate goal is to be able to align city leadership—be it in the boardroom, in nonprofits, or in City Hall—so that progress can be made for the community. This is an essential and admirable goal, but as it stands,

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<sup>53</sup> Leadership Corpus Christi, 2020



the current structure and methods of LCC do not go far enough to be able to make the scale of impact necessary.

To truly make an impact on the community, work needs to be done on a community-wide scale beyond just the uppermost level of “leaders”, no matter how broad or expansive that term is made to be. A program such as LCC has the great potential to serve as a conduit for people forming broader connections and becoming more civically engaged in their hometown. To reach a more general audience, however, LCC will need to offer more beyond their standard intensive programming. Leadership Austin provides a close-to-home example for what this expansion may look like. Like Leadership Corpus Christi, Leadership Austin began as a program housed within the Chamber of Commerce. In 2002, however, it became an independent 501(c)3.<sup>54</sup> Originally, Leadership Austin’s offerings were very similar to those of LCC, focused primarily on local “leadership development” and developing networks between them. Today, Leadership Austin offers six different programming options, designed to tackle diverse goals from standard leadership development, community networks, and information regarding community-specific issues. Each of these programs has a different breadth and focus, and are tailored for a wide variety of audiences. Regardless of the program, Leadership Austin has made a clear decision to diversify beyond the “top-down” approach which Leadership Corpus Christi is still ascribed to. Part of the reason for this change may be the fact that Leadership Austin is no longer housed within the Chamber of Commerce; perhaps a similar change in organizational structure would be beneficial to Leadership Corpus Christi.

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<sup>54</sup> Leadership Austin, 2014

As mentioned earlier, one goal of Leadership Corpus Christi programming should be to inspire all residents to take a more active role in civic life, and perhaps consider joining city leadership to bring fresh perspectives and ideas. The old systems rely on applicants being screened prior to admittance into the program, but this methodology is bound to miss those who don't conform to traditional ideas of what leadership looks like. By opening up the programming, we allow greater room to ensure that systemic biases do not hamper our city's ability to develop and nurture internal talent. Additionally, the general criteria for admittance must be broadened to include representation as a core tenant of program cohorts to promote equity in access to these opportunities. If Corpus is to succeed as a hub of growth and progressive development for the future, we must be able to create a community which fosters a strong sense of belonging and purpose.

Leadership Corpus Christi can also help to serve as a bridge to new residents, providing a key service given the context of this current discussion. If the ultimate goal is sustained, long-term growth for Corpus, then that growth must necessarily come from both internal and external forces. This means that people will be looking to move into the Coastal Bend; regardless of their reason for relocation, it is vital that they learn to adopt that all-important sense of place and recognize the beauty and value in the community. LCC can introduce these newcomers to the city, and convert them from just residents into community members. Additionally, LCC can serve as a "recruiting" arm for the city in two ways: (1) passively, through the services it provides in social connectivity and networks, it makes the city more attractive to outsiders and can raise the regional profile; and (2) actively, through direct outreach to non-residents and

partnerships with other local entities. I feel that this second option, the ways in which LCC might play a direct role in recruiting, is worthy of further discussion.

When it comes to recruitment on an individual scale, Corpus already has a built-in advantage in the form of its tourism industry. To some extent, tourism to the Coastal Bend could be viewed as a “trial run” for potential future residents (who may not even yet realize they are potential future residents). LCC can partner with local tourism organizations to draw attention not just to the physical assets of the area, but the social and economic ones as well. Visitors who come with the primary purpose of sunbathing on the beaches or sailing in the bay, but realize during the trip that this city has far more to offer beyond its natural setting. This idea has been put into action in some areas: Vermont launched its “Stay to Stay” initiative in 2018, designed to convert tourists into residents,<sup>55</sup> which has already seen several former tourist-participants take up residence in the state as a result of the program.<sup>56</sup>

A community leadership program like Leadership Corpus Christi can also play a key role in larger scale attractions of talent to the city. The presence of strong social networks and opportunities for rapid community integration can be highly appealing to any companies considering a move to Corpus; LCC can additionally offer specifically tailored services to companies to help introduce their relocating employees to their new city. Ultimately, these companies will make their relocation decisions on a variety of factors (which will be covered in greater depth later, in the section on economic development) but a key factor will be finding a city where both current and future employees can feel at home.

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<sup>55</sup> Dimeo-Ediger, 2018

<sup>56</sup> Allen, 2018

## **Environment as Infrastructure**

As we work to redefine our notions of what qualifies as infrastructure, we also must rethink the ways in which we consider our cities to be part of their natural environments, and how that environment both interacts with and is infrastructure. Where possible, infrastructure and new construction should make considerations for the ways in which it may interact constructively with nature. There are many great models of this principle all around the country, though one that stands out personally is the Waterloo Greenway and Waller Creek Conservancy project in Austin.

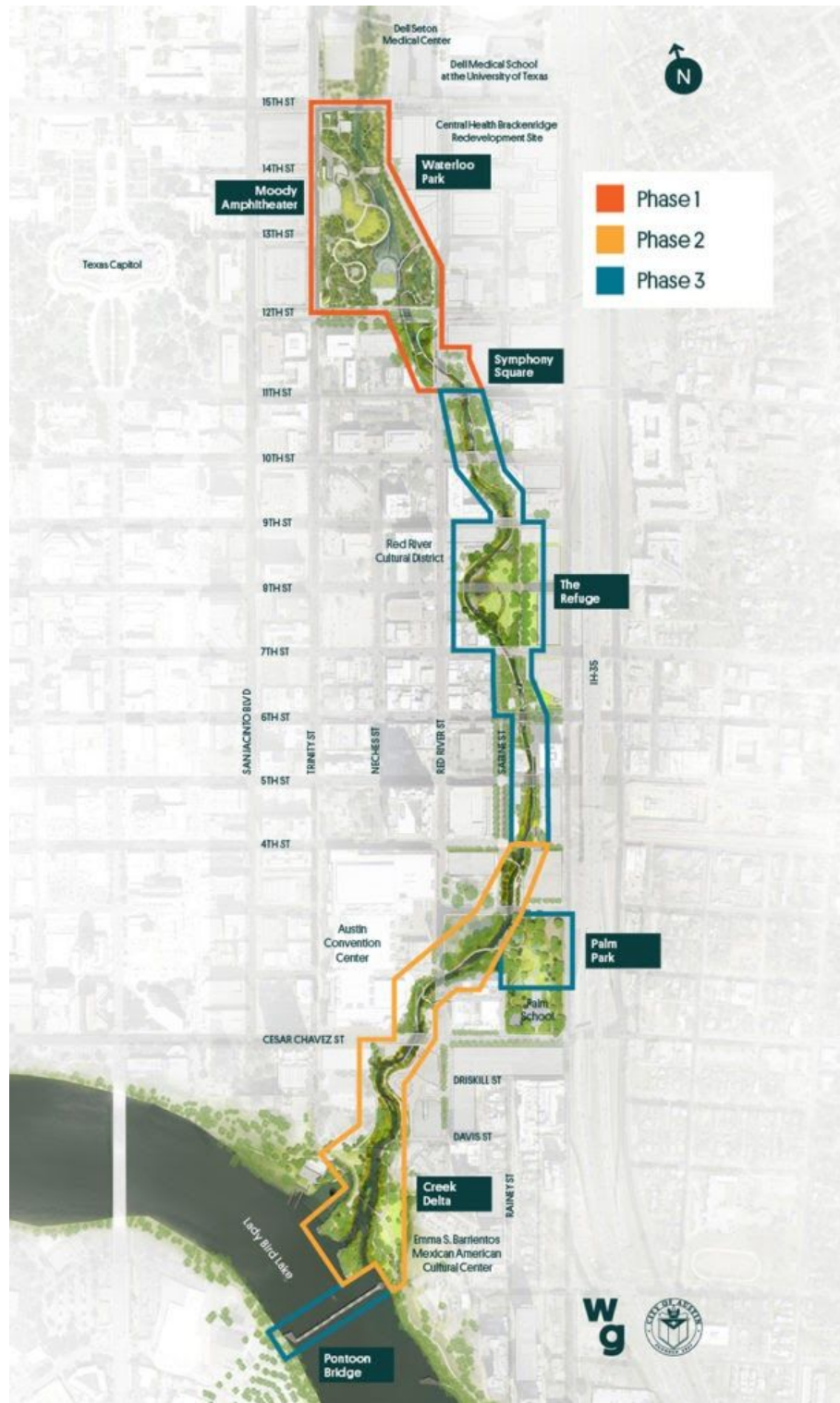
Philosophically, I feel an emphasis on the environment is important to the future of any place, but Corpus especially. In many ways, it was an ignorance to our environment that brought us to this situation. With the rise of urbanization in our modern world, we seem inclined to believe that the “environment” is something we’ve left long behind, relegated off to National Parks and undeveloped land. But try as we might, we cannot remove the environment from our city, and any efforts to do so are not only futile but deeply damaging. Additionally, the Gulf Coast truly is a naturally stunning environment, and we should work to restore the sense of belonging residents have not just in the city, but in the greater ecological space.

There are also numerous pragmatic reasons why we should embrace the natural environment in our city infrastructure. Green spaces have proven positive effects on mental and physical health, and are a vital part of social infrastructure. Studies have found strong correlations between access to urban greenery and mental health, and that access to nature is “needed to aid optimum functioning.”<sup>57</sup> Yet again, I offer Austin as a model, this time in the

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<sup>57</sup> Barton and Rogerson, 2017.

implementation of green infrastructure: the Waterloo Greenway is currently under construction in downtown Austin, and is intended to be both a restoration of the natural ecosystem (namely Waller Creek) as well as a sprawling undertaking of social infrastructure. Work is beginning now, and is planned to continue over the next half decade to create a final product which will span the length from 15th Street to Lady Bird Lake.



**Figure 1: Planned Map for the Completed Waterloo Greenway<sup>58</sup>**

<sup>58</sup> Waterloo Conservancy, 2020.

The Waterloo Greenway will restore some of the natural environment of Austin while simultaneously providing green areas for recreation, and will serve as a mile-and-a-half long physical link through the heart of urban downtown.<sup>59</sup> The full system will include extensive trails, public amphitheatres, parks, art installations, and a restoration of Waller Creek which will protect neighboring areas from erosion and flooding.<sup>60</sup> The Conservancy lists the following environmental goals for the Waterloo Greenway project:

- ❖ Build an ecologically robust and resilient urban creek, riparian corridor, and park system
- ❖ Steward the ecological system built along lower Waller Creek long term
- ❖ Connect all people to nature
- ❖ Cultivate the next generation of environmental stewards
- ❖ Become a national leader in the fields of environmental stewardship and urban greenway projects<sup>61</sup>

The same goals should be implemented for the city of Corpus Christi—where possible, environmental restoration should play a heavy role in infrastructure projects.

Green infrastructure can also offer some natural protection against the effects of climate change. Urban greenery can reduce the effects of warming temperatures; an increase of only 10% in city tree canopy cover can reduce ambient air temperatures by three to four degrees Celsius (about five to seven degrees Fahrenheit).<sup>62</sup> Plants also serve valuable roles in carbon sequestration, and the species common in marine ecosystems are especially useful in storing carbon.<sup>63</sup> These ecosystems also play vital roles in preventing erosion and flooding and

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<sup>59</sup> Waterloo Conservancy, 2020

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Aronson et. al., 2015.

<sup>63</sup> Crooks, et. al., 2011

maintaining water quality, and can be invaluable in the face of rising sea levels and increased climate-related weather events.<sup>64</sup> While the restoration of the natural environment in places through the city will not single-handedly hold back warming temperatures and rising tides, it can play an important role in concert with traditional forms of human-made mitigative infrastructure.

### **Brief Thoughts on Traditional “Hard” Infrastructure**

Though not the focus of my recommendation, traditional infrastructure cannot be ignored, as it plays a vital role in physically shaping the Corpus of the future. I may be unequipped to comment on the technical aspects of this field, but I do think there are certain broad trends and ideas we should be aware of as a city and take into account when dealing with hard infrastructure. The preceding discussion on social infrastructure must also be kept in mind when thinking of projects such as these. City leaders and planners should ensure that all physical projects keep in mind the social dimensions of the place they create, and that they live up to the ideals of creating open and welcoming spaces which foster social networks and relationships.

#### *Transportation*

We should be considering national trends: if national air travel (which is wholly incompatible with a truly “green” future in its current state) is phased out in favor of large-scale investments into innovations in transportation such as a national high-speed rail system, Corpus needs to ensure an advantageous positioning on routes. Already, hypothetical maps of such a system have made the rounds on social media and gained widespread attention. While these

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<sup>64</sup> Needelman, et. al., 2012.



maps do not represent any sort of finalized plan or reflect the thought process of decision makers, they may play a key role in shaping the future possibilities of such an endeavor. The following map represents a combination of proposals regarding what a high-speed rail system in the United States; the United States High Speed Rail Association has stated that such a system could be in place by 2030.<sup>65</sup> Crucially, this map already features Corpus at the end of a line running through major cities including Austin, St. Louis, Chicago and Boston, and also establishes linkages with the Rio Grande Valley to the south. Such a positioning would potentially serve to both maintain and strengthen Corpus' strategic position as a hub for commerce.



*Figure 2: Proposed High Speed Rail Map<sup>66</sup>*

<sup>65</sup> Davies, 2013.

<sup>66</sup> Twu, 2013.

On a state-wide scale, Corpus should be a leading advocate for rail in Texas. The “Texas Triangle” (Austin/San Antonio-Houston-DFW) contains some of the largest and fastest-growing metropoli in the nation, and plans to link them via high-speed rail have recently been discussed. Corpus should advocate for its inclusion in the second stage of such a project (The Texas Trapezoid, anyone?) to secure strong economic ties to this growing region. Afterall, despite ranking eighth in population in the state, Corpus makes the most sense as the next Texas city to be built in to such a network: Fort Worth and Arlington are already included in DFW and El Paso lies too far to the west to make immediate inclusion economically feasible; Corpus could also serve as the entry point for further transit into the Rio Grande Valley.

In this same vein, we should (as with everything else in this proposal) take a long-term approach to intra-city transit infrastructure: how will the Corpus of 2050 be navigated? Electric vehicle? Light rail? By foot? These questions don’t require immediate answers, but should be on the minds of leaders and planners as they make decisions today that will impact this future tomorrow.

### *Water*

Corpus needs to consider how water needs and supplies may change in the future. Even under our current situation, water-related infrastructure has posed frequent and repeated challenges to the city. As with many other challenges which face the city, this one may prompt out-of-the-box thinking. One option for water supply, given Corpus’ coastal situation is desalination. This option also has some personal ties: my great grandfather, who played a role in the development of the city during the 1970s, was an early advocate for a desalination plant in

Corpus. Now the time has come to give this idea a second look. Following a series of droughts in the early 2010's, the city began exploring alternative water sources, and identified desalination as a feasible source to meet local water needs.<sup>67</sup> With climate change potentially bringing increased and worsened droughts, this project becomes all the more pressing. Already, the city has applied for a \$222 million loan from the State Water Implementation Fund for Texas to build the first of two potential desalination plants.<sup>68</sup> Regardless of whether the loan request is successful, the city should include the construction of these plants in any infrastructure grant funding requests submitted during a time of climate action: water supply is a climate-related issue, and federal grants are needed to ensure that the city has reliable access to clean water for the years to come.

### *Housing*

Access to affordable housing in proximity to high opportunity areas is a must. Long term, the city may need to incentivize the construction of multi-unit dwellings, such as downtown apartments. But wherever these projects are undertaken, they cannot simply become the outgrowths of gentrification or socio-economically segregated. There are a number of policy proposals and theories which have the goal of addressing the issue, and this is a topic which requires more detailed discussion with input from more diverse voices than is possible here at this moment. Regardless of specifics, federal grants should be obtained to subsidize affordable housing units in high-opportunity and mixed-income areas. The ultimate point is this: housing, and the location of that housing, directly correlates with opportunity.<sup>69</sup> If we construct housing

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<sup>67</sup> City of Corpus Christi

<sup>68</sup> Ramirez, 2020

<sup>69</sup> Lawrence, 2019.

systems which do not recognize this truth, and allow for all residents to have access to the same opportunities, then we have failed.

### *Energy*

Greater investments are needed into wind energy, already a big player in the region.

Much of the energy source mix will be set by forces outside local control: but no options can be left unconsidered. Corpus may need to prepare itself for making the case for nuclear power in the region, which may be difficult given public misinformation and fears around nuclear energy.

This topic will be discussed in further depth in the following sections.

## Economic Development

As has been stated before, the oil and gas industry accounts for the largest current share of Corpus's economic output. Therefore, the void that would exist in its absence would be substantial, and one of the primary focuses of any plan to adapt to a post-climate action environment must be how to replace that source of economic production. It is important that in any development we seek, we are intentional in considering the total impact it may have. We cannot simply replace one socially ruinous economic activity with another lest we get caught in a vicious cycle of economic prosperity constantly coming at the cost of social welfare.

Further impetus for the need to pivot away from the industry has come in this month of April, 2020. The economic slowdown related to COVID-19 and overproduction of oil and gas has thrown major investments in the Port into uncertainty.<sup>70</sup> Already we've seen extensive worker furloughs, and industry insiders are predicting a "very painful couple of years".<sup>71</sup> We may very well be looking at a permanent shift in the economic order of Corpus Christi, and the need for change is all the more urgent. It is becoming more and more clear that Corpus's economic wagon is hitched to a rapidly dying horse and could soon find itself stalled and directionless. With changes rapidly approaching, Corpus needs to plan for how to replace the fossil fuel industry, as well as deal with newly unemployed workers who will be left behind by the fall of these behemoths.

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<sup>70</sup> Schneider, 2020.

<sup>71</sup> Cargo, 2020.

## **New Industries**

If Corpus is to break its unhealthy entanglement with the fossil fuel industry, then it needs to be thinking now of potential replacements. When considering the new industries that could shape Corpus' future, we need to keep in mind the capabilities and current resources of the city. Some industries may not be new entrants to the city as much as they are simply new opportunities for growth and expansion. New industries should also be evaluated in terms of the number of additional jobs and economic prosperity they are able to indirectly create: some industries will necessarily create more than others.

Energy production does not have to become a part of Corpus' past; current renewable energy production like wind can be expanded, and new sources can be considered. Wind is currently the most promising for immediate increased development given its current prevalence in the area: Corpus is one of the largest wind-energy producers in a state that leads the nation in the field, and the Port of Corpus Christi is one of the largest handlers of wind-energy cargo. However, wind energy has serious limitations in its ability to meet the full energy needs of the nation in a post-fossil fuel world, and alternative green sources require serious investments. Nuclear energy is the most promising, though it comes with unique challenges.

As discussed before, nuclear energy poses difficulties from a public opinion standpoint. However, given the fact that future energy needs by the United States are not likely to be easily met with a mix of current widespread renewables like wind and solar, nuclear energy seems likely to play a part in the nation's energy future. If this is the case, then it may be worthwhile to start exploring how Corpus can leverage and prepare for this coming trend.

Nuclear, as mentioned, has a number of costs which currently prohibit wide-scale adoption. The construction of a traditional nuclear power plant takes an average of about fifteen years; wind and solar energy production facilities can require as little as two years.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, there are public concerns regarding the safety<sup>73</sup> of nuclear energy, fueled largely by the natural associations between nuclear energy and nuclear bombs and the rare yet prominent examples of nuclear meltdowns, including Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and most recently, Fukushima.<sup>74</sup> Finally, the costs of building a nuclear power plant are significant, and there are a number of regulatory and structural hurdles preventing immediate wide-scale construction in the US.<sup>75</sup> But one idea which has started to gain traction may have some promising potential for implementation in Corpus: small modular reactors, or SMRs.

SMRs are essentially “microreactors”: small, self-contained nuclear reactors roughly the size of a storage container. One SMR generates a small fraction of the energy of a full size plant, but they can be grouped together to provide a similar output while occupying a smaller physical footprint.<sup>76</sup> Microreactors also can be produced at far lower cost than traditional plants as they are able to be centrally manufactured and distributed, whereas plants must be treated as massive infrastructure projects built on-site with custom installation.<sup>77</sup> This new innovation in nuclear technology could also increase the safety of the reactors by further reducing the already very low risk of meltdown.<sup>78</sup> Microreactors dovetail nicely with the future energy needs of Corpus in a

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<sup>72</sup> Jacobson, 2019.

<sup>73</sup> In fact, nuclear energy is actually far safer than our current sources of energy generation, and actually releases less radiation into the air than coal. (Rhodes, 2019).

<sup>74</sup> Shellenberger, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Yglesias, 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Cho, 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Yglesias, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> Cho, 2019.

post-fossil fuel world, but the relationship between the city and the technology need not stop there. Given the already industrial worker base and access to a major seaport, Corpus could also be a target for an SMR manufacturing center. The reactors could be built in Corpus, and then shipped across the world to help meet the zero-carbon energy needs of other localities. In this way, Corpus not only would achieve a thriving new industry, but would also be in a way rectifying its past as a major contributor to the current climate crisis.

Expansion of the Port of Corpus Christi is also an important factor. As mentioned, energy-related transit can continue to flow through the region, whether it be from the existing source of wind farm supplies or from new microreactor production. As we see increased population and economic growth in the nations of Central and South America, Corpus could also serve as the “Gateway to Latin America” as trade coming through the port from countries to the south increases. The development of greater rail linkages as discussed earlier could also play a key role in facilitating trade through the region.

High-tech industries make attractive targets for Corpus, and could be attracted to the city given the lower costs of living and the appeal of the coastal location. The greatest barrier would be the talent pool present in the city not currently possessing requisite skills for the industry, but with a long term focus and investments into local universities (Texas A&M Corpus Christi and Texas A&M Kingsville) as well as a greater integration of Corpus into the growing Austin-San Antonio region via the I-37 corridor, the pitch could be made to these companies to open operations by the Bay. The introduction of these companies can have a myriad of additional benefits, including investments by the companies into local education, and the cultivation of an entrepreneurial environment which could lead to a thriving pool of “home-grown” enterprises.



### **Dealing with Worker Displacement**

To avoid NAFTA-esque problems discussed earlier, serious attention should be given to the issue of workers displaced from the fossil-fuel industry. The city needs to be sure to take considerations for both short- and long-term challenges: immediate employment will be needed for workers following the exit of the fossil fuel industry from the region, and long term investments are needed to help with skill retraining and education. Where possible, the city should also incentivize the hiring of all displaced workers by new and expanding industries in the city.

Funds should be allocated to cover the wages of displaced workers, and jobs can be found early on in city infrastructure construction. Additional work will be needed in restoring the land where the refineries were once located (more on this later); who better to undertake this task than those who potentially know the land better than anyone else? Some structures may be able to be refurbished and repurposed, others may require demolition. The safety and suitability of the land for future public and economic use will need to be assessed, and measures taken to bring it up to appropriate standards. The shoreline and land should also be restored (with guidance from local ecologists) to a state closer to the original natural environment, which could require additional construction and labor.

Short-term job guarantees area start, but more action will need to be taken. The land they worked to restore could play a part in this endeavor, and future economic activity in the area should take into consideration those who worked to make it possible. Funds will also be needed to help those who need further education obtain it, ideally at one of the local institutions of

higher education or technical trade schools so that their talents can be obtained for local benefits. Above all, we should make sure that these workers know that their city is taking care of them. This population may be one of the most vulnerable to some of the ideas discussed earlier in the section on eco-fascism, but these ideologies can only take root if people feel they speak to some true experience they encounter. The issue with NAFTA was that former manufacturing workers felt left behind; we cannot allow history to repeat itself here.

Higher-skill workers from these industries may need some retraining, but they could serve to make the city's talent pool all the more attractive to new industries considering relocation. Due to overlaps in capabilities and core competencies, prime areas for employment of these workers may very well be in other energy production areas. These workers, in a sense, could be Corpus's "wildcard": a huge pool of educated engineers and other knowledgeable workers free to move into new industries. The issue is that these workers may also be among the most mobile, and the most likely to leave the city in search of economic opportunity if it does not materialize rapidly enough. Therefore, the city should take immediate steps to retain these workers, and leave all options on the table to incentivize them to stay and help build the Corpus of the future.

## Land Use

Today, Corpus is home to 26 refinery facilities, largely clustered in a strip of land commonly called “Refinery Row”. This land is some of the most economically productive in Corpus, yet should necessary steps be taken against climate change, it will be essentially made worthless in its current state over the transition period. Using funds from the national investment into climate change solutions, I propose that this land should be acquired by the City of Corpus Christi, or some other body organized for the express purpose of overseeing the land and authorized to act on the city’s behalf. This land will require serious investments into clean-up and refurbishment after its heavy industrial life is over, and some of this early work will serve as ideal jobs for displaced refinery workers as they engage in technical programs for work in other fields. But after this initial work is done, I believe it is necessary that the city dream big about what this land could be.



***Figure 3: Map of Refinery Row<sup>79</sup>***

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<sup>79</sup> Author’s creation using Google Maps and information from ATSDR.

We are staring at the possibility of nearly four and a half square miles of prime waterfront land becoming ripe for development.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, the city could look into acquiring additional plots along the water and to link some of the areas into a more contiguous mass. In some ways, then, the crisis we face as a city also offers opportunities. With the serious investments required just to maintain the status quo, why not implement bold visions to shape the future of Corpus? The experiment which I propose in the following sections may prove ultimately to be a dead-end, but it may also allow us to test a model with greater applications for the future.

### **Henry George and Fairhope, Alabama: A Case Study in Land Policy**

In early January of 1894, the Single Tax Club of Des Moines, Iowa decided to make a town. This may seem an odd decision, but the Des Moines STC was full of odd-thinkers and iconoclasts. The town they wished to form would reflect their heterodoxy: it would be based upon the ideas of the economist Henry George, and be built primarily on his Single Tax Theory. Led largely by member E.B. Gaston, the effort to create the town that would become Fairhope, Alabama was inspired by the excesses and inequality of the Gilded Age. In a time when a handful of monopolies and robber barons held vast amounts of capital and political power, George's ideas captivated egalitarian-minded reformers across the country. What then were these theories that so captivated a part of the nation at the turn of the century?

Henry George was born in 1839, and his experiences witnessing first hand the vast power of monopolies and the struggles of the working class led him to question why it seemed to be the case that even as overall prosperity and progress in America and the world increased, poverty

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<sup>80</sup> Area estimation based on Google Maps, ATSDR's map of refinery row, and my own calculations.

rose as well.<sup>81</sup> Where many economists of his day saw a bimodal distribution of economic outcomes and focused only on the rising average, George wondered why the two extremes seemed to be yawning apart: why should there be, as he termed it, an “Increase of Want with Increase of Wealth”?<sup>82</sup> In his seminal work *Progress and Poverty*, the American economist offered his analysis on the contradictions inherent in the economic system, and argued that they fundamentally stemmed from the same forces. Progress requires privileges, George notes, which are rights given to some people and denied to others. If a farmer does not have an exclusive privilege to the land she plows, and cannot expect any state or governmental body to guarantee her property against incursions from others, then why should she invest in the economic utility of that land? The government, having an incentive to encourage economic output from farmers and other land-holders, essentially grants her a privileged right to the land. George, while believing that this order was a necessary feature, saw that it would also lead to an unequal distribution of wealth between the privileged and others in society unless counter-acting measures were put in place. George’s fundamental argument was that in order to prevent this inequality, the government cannot simply grant privilege without demanding something in return. The standard tax system, which was supposed to in some way address this problem, was focused on taxing production rather than privilege, something he saw as worsening the issue rather than resolving it.<sup>83</sup> In its place, George proposed a “single tax” on land, essentially demanding that land holders pay for their privilege, and an elimination of all other taxes on “productive activities”.<sup>84</sup> This idea at its core requires a fundamental rethinking of the role which land plays in our economic

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<sup>81</sup> George, 1886

<sup>82</sup> Harris, 2004

<sup>83</sup> George, 1886

<sup>84</sup> Despite his work largely gaining renown and being known as a “single tax” proposal, George himself did not prefer this terminology.

system: by a Georgist view, all land is common property and no individual may get rich off of the rent of that land.<sup>85</sup>

This, at its core, was the idea which inspired the Des Moines Single Tax Club and Single Tax Clubs like it across the nation. With his simple yet revolutionary idea, George captured the attention of a great variety of thinkers and public figures, from Hellen Keller to Albert Einstein to FDR and Leo Tolstoy, and inspired the creation of several attempted utopias like Fairhope.<sup>86</sup> Fairhope was perhaps the most successful, and one of the few which has survived to the present day, though the Fairhope of today far more closely resembles a standard American suburb than the Georgist utopia it was intended to be.

Fairhope was founded by Gaston and the Des Moines STC with an original purchase of 132 acres along the sparsely-populated shore of Mobile Bay. This land was to be held not by any individual, but rather by the Fairhope Industrial Association. The FIA would grant long-term leases to individuals who would in turn pay the full rental value of that land: this was the Fairhope approximation of George's single tax. These rent payments would then accrue into a general fund which would be used for the common good in the development of infrastructure and other necessary public goods. In this way, Fairhope hoped to convert increases in land value into increased societal wealth, which would then spur further increases in the value of land. Over time, the original holdings of the FIA would increase to more than 400 acres, and the population

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<sup>85</sup> DeNigris, 2007

<sup>86</sup> Interestingly, George's ideas inspired a 1904 board game called "The Landlord's Game", which would eventually give rise to the popular modern game of "Monopoly" (an especially ironic name considering George's history with the monopolies of his time). The original iteration of the game was meant to highlight the ills of a system which rewarded rent-seeking behavior and speculative land purchases, though that message seems to have fallen by the wayside in the years since.

of Fairhope grew twenty-fold in its first decade of existence: from twenty-five in 1894 to over 500 in 1904.

Ultimately, however, Fairhope did not live up to its lofty egalitarian goals. For one, the city was not able to achieve a true Georgist vision of tax policy, as municipalities then and now do not have anywhere near final authority on all taxes residents must pay. Henry George never visited this town born from his ideas, and died a few years after its founding, yet he was opposed to incomplete institutions of his theory, believing they were doomed to failure. Furthermore, Henry George was a believer in women's suffrage and the importance of "secur[ing] the equal rights of all", especially "men and women... at the very bottom of the social scale",<sup>87</sup> yet Fairhope made the early decision to accept the Southern status quo of racial segregation. In the end, the dream of Fairhope couldn't fully survive the Great Depression and the onslaught of national, state, and county tax codes.

Still, the model of Fairhope may offer some ideas for how George's progressive economic ideas may be implemented on a small scale. This idea ultimately forms the core of the proposal for what could replace the refineries of Corpus Christi.

### **This Land is Our Land: A Collective Future for Post-Refinery Land**

Having now discussed the history of a small Alabama town and a niche American economist, where are we to go from here? I feel there is great promise in Corpus potentially acquiring the land once occupied by refineries and setting it to a novel purpose with societal

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<sup>87</sup> George, 1883.

benefits. The following proposal may not be the most “shovel ready” idea in the wake of climate action, but the funds for the project should be requested at the beginning of federal allocation.

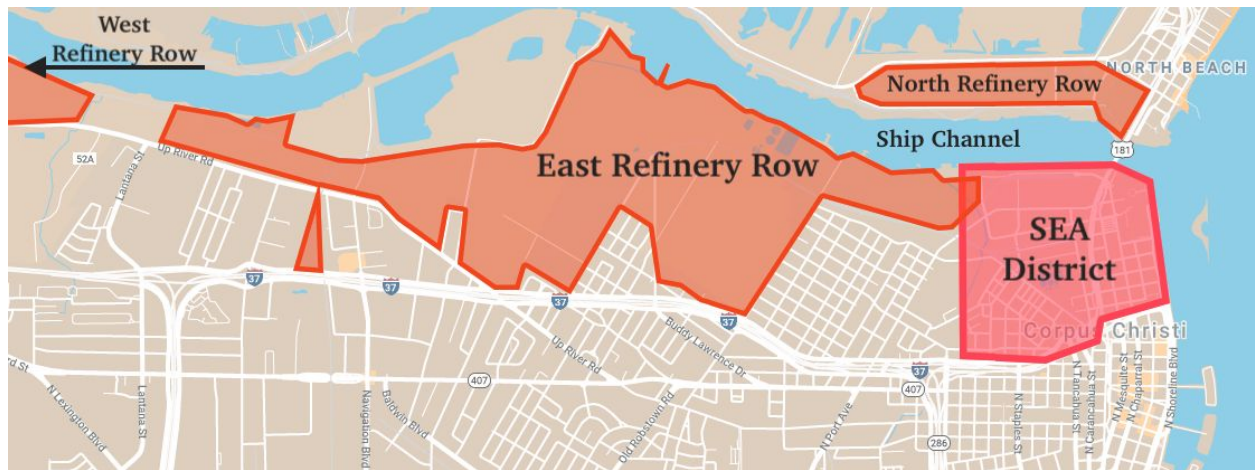
Initial external investments would be needed to cover the purchase price of the land from the refineries (reduced, of course, given the wear from industrial usage) and the wages for workers to prepare and revitalize the land for public use. The purpose of this land will be threefold, and relate to many of the goals and principles already covered earlier in this thesis. First, the land will serve as areas for public parks and social infrastructure: open areas where people can come and engage with their community. Second, parcels of the land will be allotted for development, with offices and workspaces leased out to provide both economic development and to build an attractive business district with amenities for all residents. Finally, this land will be used to address the ills caused by its past, and to generate reinvestments into the surrounding neighborhoods and communities as well as to provide opportunities for local residents and displaced workers. Over time, if the project is successful, I see no reason why it would not expand to additional plots of available land, serving as a mechanism for rapid economic development and productive land use.

### *Public Life*

Social infrastructure should play a large role in the future development of the city, and this district is no exception. The land seems like a prime location for these sorts of investments. Already, the surrounding areas are becoming hotspots for recreation: the eastern edge of the region overlaps with the downtown “SEA District” (Sports, Entertainment, Art), home to live music venues, multiple museums, bars, and Whataburger Field, home of the Corpus Christi



Hooks, a minor league baseball team. Meanwhile, the strip across the Ship Channel encloses land in North Beach, near hotspots such as the Texas State Aquarium and the U.S.S. Lexington. The land, once deindustrialized and restored, could have native plant species reintroduced and be the perfect setting for a network of “hike-and-bike” trails.<sup>88</sup>



***Figure 4: Map of Refinery Row and the SEA District<sup>89</sup>***

In the earlier discussion on environmental infrastructure, I mentioned Austin’s Waterloo Greenway. If I may repurpose a common phrase, then this district could be Corpus’ Waterloo. This land could enclose a sprawling system of interconnected parks and outdoor recreation and entertainment areas interwoven with native flora: an oasis lying in the shadow of the bustling ship channel with proximity to downtown and the SEA District.

### *Economic Activity*

My proposal is not, of course, that all this land should be converted into public parks. The primary purpose of this land will be for economic activity and new businesses, with an emphasis

<sup>88</sup> For those familiar with Corpus, the rough model I have in mind is the Suter Wildlife Area and the trails around the TAMUCC campus.

<sup>89</sup> Author’s creation using Google Maps and information from ASTDR and Go Downtown Corpus Christi.

on those which create social value. The land will be held in common by the city under Georgist principles, with leases made out on a long term basis. Certain incentives would be built in to give preference to businesses started by or employing residents of the nearby neighborhood, former plant workers, and other communities affected by climate change. Some initial buildings and structures will be constructed by the city, but other parcels will be left for private development, though the city will play a role in ensuring that all new development fits with the greater plan for the district: the city must play a role in central planning to ensure that the space remains open, with public areas and sites for social infrastructure.

Leasees will pay the full value of the land they occupy to the city, all rents will thus be captured in this “single tax”. To the extent possible, all other local taxes will be limited for economic activity occurring on that land in order to encourage productive development. This would not necessarily capture the full Georgist dream, though if the program were successful enough, alternative options could be explored to expand the scope of the project. One possibility would be the creation of a fund designed to cover the additional external taxes incurred by leasees through activity taking place on the land, though this could be inefficient. Perhaps, in the implementation of this proposal, the city could lobby state and national entities to create a special tax zone for the region, allowing for a closer adherence to the goal of a “single tax”.

Not all economic endeavors would be based entirely on private initiative. The largest proposal the city should consider having a hand in is a start-up incubator. Start-up incubators provide support, resources, and funding to help young companies succeed.<sup>90</sup> The focus would be on investing in local entrepreneurs, and giving them a space to launch their ideas from. The open

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<sup>90</sup> Willson, 2019

land in this district could be a perfect fit for this idea, with office workspace available to local entrepreneurs. This could be the perfect way for Corpus to launch new, home-grown businesses and reinvest in residents. Necessarily, there would be some restrictions. Start-up leases would be of shorter durations than general leases, and be limited by the size of the companies: as they grow and become successful, they would need to relocate, perhaps to another plot in the district. But these start-ups could also receive hands-on mentorship from experienced professionals, and receive special incentives in order to help them grow and succeed.

### *Social Value*

The economic rents captured from the land would be invested into a fund by the city, and could be used for a variety of purposes. Profits from the land values should be reinvested into the area and the surrounding neighborhood, which has historically suffered as a result of their proximity to Refinery Row. Additionally, special considerations will need to be made to mitigate the potential effects of gentrification in the area.

There are two ideas I will explore in terms of neighborhood investment: one is very simple direct investment into improvements in local resources, the second is perhaps more ambitious: direct payments to residents, perhaps in the form of “baby bonds” (more on this shortly). The first idea is simple: profits from the district could be used to support public works projects and schools in the neighborhood. A neighborhood council would be formed to allow residents to make decisions on where to allocate these funds to best serve their community. The second proposal could also be implemented in concert with this first, but would be a very specific type of investment into the people of the neighborhood.

What is meant when I use the term “baby bonds”? The idea is a direct borrowing from Senator Cory Booker’s platform during his recent bid for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination. The core idea of his proposal is to address the racial wealth gap: \$1,000 is invested into an account for every child upon birth, and up to \$2,000 (depending on family income) every year thereafter. On the child’s eighteenth birthday, the money becomes available for use for wealth-building purposes such as a down payment on a home or college tuition. Under the Senator’s proposal, a child could accrue nearly \$50,000 through their childhood if they fall into the lowest income bracket.<sup>91</sup> A similar plan could be adapted for children born in the neighborhood bordering the former “refinery row”, with the funding for the system based from the profits generated by the district. The investments may have to be somewhat smaller than Senator Booker’s plan, but could still be substantial enough to make for serious benefits in the lives of residents, and represent a positive first step towards correcting the environmental racism that has been present for so long in Refinery Row.

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<sup>91</sup> Kliff, 2018

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

#### **The Wheel's Still in Spin**

This project began with an understanding of an urgent timeline set by climate experts, yet at the time of this writing, it is clear that the timeline Corpus is now on is far more immediate. The collapse of the status quo upon which Corpus is built may be imminently approaching, before it seems the national government is ready to take action. COVID-19 has not single-handedly broken the economic system of Corpus, but it has made its dramatic failings all the more apparent. The external environments do not currently seem ideal for the full-scale implementation of the ideas laid out here: Donald Trump is still president, and has shown no interest to this point in even recognizing the reality of climate change. His presumptive Democratic challenger, former Vice President Joe Biden, is plagued by scandal and has a checkered history when it comes to addressing climate change.<sup>92</sup> It seems possible that our current state and national leaders are content to (yet again in the words of Bob Dylan) “stand in the doorway and block up the hall.” What, then, is the city to do should it face the daunting prospect of facing these changes alone?

Many of the projects outlined in Chapter Three require investments beyond the scale the city could muster without federal or state assistance, but they represent an ethos the city could begin to strive towards. The key principle is this: wherever we go, whatever path the city chooses, we must all swim together. Organizations like Leadership Corpus Christi can play a key

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<sup>92</sup> Darby, 2020.

role now in starting to set that direction, and keep residents focused on the goal of saving the place they call home.

The city already plays an active role in the promotion of green energy sources like wind; those efforts should be increased, and conversations should begin about the prospect of nuclear energy. The initial goal with these industries is not simply to meet the energy needs of the region, but to meet local employment needs in the face of dwindling headcounts in fossil fuel related businesses. Beginning investments in social infrastructure and social-capital building organizations will start to shape the city into the type of place businesses are willing to consider relocating to, fortifying the city in case the fossil fuel industry is swept out even faster than anticipated. Furloughed workers from the industry should be on the city's radar, and steps should be taken to find work and make our commitment to them clear through long-term investments in their education and training. And while the land in Refinery Row may not be immediately available for the implementation of the ambitious plans laid out in the preceding section, some steps could be taken to pave the way for the project.

There is no reason why the creation of the start-up incubator must wait: office space could be found and mentors hired to start the endeavor now, allowing it to grow and develop before relocating to the district at some future date. As land becomes available in and near the district, the city should start forming plans for acquisition and construction of initial facilities. Additionally, the SEA and North Beach districts should be the source of increased sustainable development with a focus on social infrastructure to prepare for future integration into the full planned district. If the city can start swimming now, then we can be in a position to rapidly implement the full changes once the national inertia finally turns towards action on climate.

## **Come Gather ‘Round, People**

My goal through this exercise has been to craft something that could make a difference in the battle against climate change and benefit my hometown. As I’ve discussed in depth, there is truly something special about being *from* somewhere, and the connection it affords you to that place and others who call it home. I am proud to be from Corpus, and have long felt a duty to give back to that place which has given me so much. The one hope that I had for this project was to learn, and further hone my abilities to act as an advocate for my hometown, and while I certainly do not have all the answers, I am energized and ready to take on the challenges which await. I know that one day I want to return to work on behalf of my city, and whether this project turns out to be a flowering plant or merely the seed of an idea for change, I want to be able to make a positive impact on the city of Corpus Christi.

Ultimately, there is no telling what the future holds for the city of Corpus Christi, but one thing is clear: its fate lies firmly in its own hands. Earlier, I posed the question, “What is Corpus?”. This is the moment in which that question will be answered, as we rise to face the challenges which threaten to subsume our home. I do not have all the answers, and I can’t state with any certainty what will happen in the months and years to come. But I know this city, and I know that we are capable of overcoming the difficulties of the current moment. The fundamental principle of the coming days is change, and with that change, I see opportunity. As I close this thesis, I feel it appropriate to return full circle to that song which has woven in and out of this work. I began with the first verse, which I felt so fitting, and now I find the final verse to be equally appropriate as I conclude. Things are changing rapidly, in ways we cannot fully predict, and our future is up in the air. To quote Dylan yet again,

*“The line it is drawn,*

*The curse it is cast.*

*The slow one now will later be fast*

*As the present now will later be past.*

*The order is rapidly fadin’.*

*And the first one now will later be last*

*For the times, they are a-changin’”*



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## BIOGRAPHY



Holden Hopkins was not born in Corpus Christi on July 14, 1997, though he humbly requests that you forgive this sin. A life-long Longhorn, he was accepted into the University of Texas at Austin after graduating from W.B. Ray High School in 2016. Holden is a student in the Plan II and Canfield Business Honors Programs, as well as the recipient of the Fred A. Gottesman Forty Acres Scholarship. In 2017, he began his pursuit of the Business and Public Policy Certificate from the McCombs School of Business, and was recognized as the Outstanding Student of this program for 2020.

During his time in college, he has been active both on and off-campus. Holden has served in numerous positions with Student Government and worked on several campaigns, including his own. Long passionate about his hometown, his first internship was with his local State Representative Todd Hunter. Holden has also had the privilege of interning with the Texas Exes, Texas Democratic Party, and the Global Community Affairs team at Applied Materials, Inc. Long term, Holden has plans to attend law school, and wants to be able to make a difference in his local community.